DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 244 189 CG 017 461

TITLE Help for "At Risk" Children: School-Community Guidance Centers.
INSTITUTION Texas Education Agency, Austin.
REPORT NO GE-4-243-01
PUB DATE Jan 84
NOTE 9p.
AVAILABLE FROM Publications Distribution Office, Texas Education Agency, 201 East 11th Street, Austin, TX 78701 ($1.00).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Failure; Adolescents; Dropout Prevention; *Guidance Programs; Guidelines; *High Risk Persons; Program Descriptions; *Program Development; *School Community Programs; Secondary Education
IDENTIFIERS *Texas

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the school-community guidance centers authorized by the Texas legislature in 1981 in an attempt to decrease the incidence of student disruptive behavior and student contacts with the criminal justice system. The variety of services, including academic instruction, counseling, home/school liaison, and follow-up programs, are described. Four program models, developed to meet specific school district needs, are presented: in school suspension; alternative schools; services integration centers; and juvenile detention facilities. The anticipated program benefits and eligibility requirements are listed, and program results, based on evaluation data from 11 centers, are offered. Suggestions for starting a school-community guidance center are presented in the following areas: needs assessment, commitment, funding, facility and staff selection, program content, admission and exit procedures, parental involvement, community support, follow-up services, and evaluation. A contact person and telephone number are listed for those individuals seeking further information. (BL)

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Photo courtesy of W. R. Robbins Secondary School Austin Independent School District

# HELP FOR "AT RISK" CHILDREN
# SCHOOL-COMMUNITY GUIDANCE CENTERS

## Texas Education Agency
## Department of Professional Support
## School-Community Guidance Center Services

CG 017461

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# HELP FOR "AT RISK" CHILDREN
# SCHOOL-COMMUNITY GUIDANCE CENTERS

**BACKGROUND** The 67th Texas Legislature in 1981 authorized school-community guidance centers for school districts located in a number of large and small cities across the state. Built on the success of a four-year pilot project conducted in six districts, the school-community guidance center concept is expanding into a wide range of schools throughout Texas. The centers are designed to work closely with truant officers, police departments, and juvenile probation units to help students with severe behavioral problems or character disorders. Their objective: provide the coordination necessary to bring effective assistance to troubled students and their parents.

In 1983, the emphasis of the program was changed by the 68th Texas Legislature. First priority for services is now given to students found by a court to have engaged in delinquent conduct or conduct indicating a need for supervision. The purpose is to decrease the incidence of student disruptive behavior and thus decrease contacts with the criminal justice system.

**SERVICES PROVIDED** The centers provide a variety of services designed to reduce the factors that contribute to truancy, academic failure, dropping out, and delinquency. The basic core of services includes instruction, counseling, home/school liaison, and follow-up. Basic academic skills are emphasized through individualized instruction or tutorial assistance from the center's staff. Social skills development, problem-solving, and job awareness are offered through the counseling component. Liaison with the home and with the students' home campuses is maintained through attendance services. Parents are encouraged to meet with the center's staff and to participate in problem solving. After students return to their regular schools, follow-up services are provided for one semester through phone calls and other personal asistance, as needed.

Each center has also developed a system of coordinating services with other agencies that serve these students. Some community agency personnel work with the students and staff at the centers. In other cases, the students are referred directly to the agencies. Cooperative arrangements are most frequently worked out with drug/alcohol abuse treatment, child welfare, family counseling, family planning, juvenile probation, and health agencies.

A number of centers throughout the state have developed their own unique program features. The following are examples.

- A reading tutorial program was developed by the juvenile probation department. The service is available to students on probation who are attending the school-community guidance center. The tutors are community volunteers. Many students were able to achieve more than one grade level in English and math per year.

- An alternative school, serving a population of severely alienated students, offers a curriculum combining English, math, and science with a strong vocational education component. Students learn small engine repair, furniture refinishing, horticulture, and building trades. Included is a work/study program which offers on-the-job training.

- Electronic, oil, and accounting firms in several cities allow employees to serve as school volunteers during normal working hours. These volunteers provide stimulating learning activities and a friendly listening ear for children who need positive role models.

**TYPES OF MODELS** Individual school-community guidance centers have been developed to meet the specific needs of each school district. Therefore, no two programs are exactly alike. Some are located off-campus in a store front facility or in a previously vacant school building, while others are located on-campus. In some centers the students are required to attend; in others, they apply for admission. Centers also differ in methods of instruction, staffing patterns, and type of curriculum offered.

Despite these variations, the centers do share certain similarities. They can be categorized into the following models.

- In-School Suspension: A center for students who would otherwise have received out-of-school suspension for disciplinary infractions. In some cases, students can request placement at the center. The period of assignment ranges from one day to a semester, but averages five or six days. Students receive instructional assignments from their regular teachers and are expected to complete the assignments. The center is staffed by a teacher, who supervises the class, a counselor, and a home/school coordinator. After completing their assigned time period at the center, students return to their regular school program or are placed in a more appropriate educational setting.

- Alternative School: An off-campus, long-term center for students who are encountering difficulties functioning in a regular school. The individualized curriculum seeks to motivate the student and reduce the antisocial or other inappropriate behavior. A small teacher/student ratio is maintained to encourage interaction and teamwork.

- Services Integration Center: A center where social, youth, and recreational agencies provide outreach services to students and their families at an identified school site. The services of the city are brought to the school, thereby improving coordination among agencies. An example of this model is the Cities in School Project, located in Houston.

- Juvenile Detention Facility: A county-operated center where juveniles are detained in a physically restricted site while awaiting court disposition or transfer to another jurisdiction or agency. The school districts provide educational and counseling services through the school-community guidance center programs. Without these types of projects, the students would be deprived of educational opportunities.

# ANTICIPATED PROGRAM BENEFITS

- Increase in the number of students acquiring social competence and making gains in academic achievement.

- Decrease in truancy, student dropouts, suspensions, and expulsions.

- Increase in average daily attendance.

- Diversion of some students from the juvenile justice system.

- Decrease in the incidence of daytime crime committed by juveniles.

**ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS** The Agency sends requests for proposals to school district superintendents every two years following the regular session of the Texas Legislature. Selection is based on a competitive review process, with the funding level determined by appropriations for the next biennium. The maximum grant awarded each project is set by the Commissioner of Education.

Sixteen projects were funded for the 1983-84 cycle. While individual projects are approved for two years, funding is allocated on a one-year basis. The second year of funding is contingent upon a satisfactory report from a monitoring visit and the overall quality of the first year's implementation.

**PROGRAM RESULTS** Based on several indicators of performance, the projects have demonstrated considerable success. Evaluative data collected from 11 school-community guidance centers during 1982-1983 indicate the 92 percent of the students returned to the regular classroom. Only 112 students, or 2.3 percent, dropped out of school while enrolled at a center. Approximately 27 percent returned to the local center more than once. In the case of an in-school suspension model, the disruptive behavior of the students changed or decreased

significantly upon being returned to the regular campus. In the case of an alternative school model, students returning to the regular campus were able to function more effectively both in and out of the classroom. Two centers reported a noticeable reduction in juvenile daytime crime during their first year of operation.

Since students attending a center continued to be enrolled in school rather than suspended, districts continued to receive the state funds which are based on average daily attendance records. Approximately $318,605 in state funds accrued to the districts due to this increased average daily attendance, assuming an average stay of eight days per student at a center. More importantly, students were provided an alternative educational setting where they were given intensive assistance with their academic and behavioral problems.

# STARTING A SCHOOL-COMMUNITY GUIDANCE CENTER

The following suggestions are offered to districts interested in implementing a school-community guidance center.

**NEEDS ASSESSMENT** A well-planned needs assessment can guide the district in establishing priorities and in choosing the target group(s). In determining need, the district should analyze data on truancy, suspension, and dropout rates, along with the annual incidence of disciplinary actions for disruptive behavior. The local police or juvenile probation office may have documentation on juvenile delinquency rates, number and status of offenders, and incidence of daytime crime committed by juveniles. In order to avoid duplication of efforts, the district should survey the community to determine whether necessary services are being provided by other organizations.

**COMMITMENT** To ensure a successful program, it is essential that the school board and the superintendent be committed to serving "at risk" children. With this kind of support, the resources needed to implement the program can be used most effectively.

**FUNDING** All potential sources of funding should be identified. In addition to local district funds, other possible sources include money available through state vocational and compensatory education programs, funds targeted by counties for juvenile delinquency prevention, the Governor's Office of General Counsel and Criminal Justice, private foundations, and school-community guidance centers (see Eligibility Requirements, page 4). The guidelines for each of these categorical programs state whether funds are available for the type of program being considered by the district.

**SELECTING A FACILITY** First, determine whether the center is going to be located on-campus or off-campus. Some districts have renovated previously unused campuses or have leased buildings from the city or the county. For on-campus programs, there may be empty classrooms available.

Second, determine the space requirements of the center. Diagram the location and arrangement of classrooms, restrooms, counseling offices, administrative office, and records storage area in the plan. Also build future expansion requirements into the initial plan.

**SELECTING THE STAFF** The selection of staff is the most important factor in starting a school-community guidance center program. In recruiting staff, consider the following characteristics:

- Ability to establish working relationships with students.
- Competence in instruction and counseling.
- Understanding of student motivations and reward systems.
- Knowledge of community resources such as drug/alcohol abuse treatment services, child abuse services, shelters, and private and public counseling services.

Experienced teachers are needed at these centers. The job demands skills in classroom management, tutoring in several subjects or individualizing the curriculum, and in diagnosing learning and behaviorial problems.

## PROGRAM CONTENT

Decisions on program components should be made early. In addition to the instructional component, other elements include counseling, home/school liaison, and community referral services.

Arrangements should be made with other departments of the district to provide services to the center when needed. These may include special education, health, and psychological services. If the center is located off-campus, transportation for students may be necessary.

## ADMISSION AND EXIT PROCEDURES

Written procedures for referring students to the center should be developed and communicated to students, staff, parents, and the community. The information can be disseminated through student handbooks, brochures, presentations to civic groups, and through the news media. Any special education students should be placed in accordance with *Policies and Administrative Procedures for the Education of Handicapped Students*, published by the Texas Education Agency. The district must follow due process procedures consistent with the U.S. Supreme Court decision in Goss vs. Lopez (1975). In this case, the Court ruled that before depriving any student of a free public education, the district must inform that student of all accusations, and must give the student the opportunity to present his or her side of the case.

It is recommended that the center's director have the authority to determine (1) which students will be accepted, (2) the length of their assignment, and (3) whether or not a student may return to the center. The director's authority should be specified in the district's policies and procedures. The director should examine the program at regular intervals to make sure minority and low socio-economic students are not over-represented at the center.

Procedures for leaving the center must be written and made available to students. Most centers require the completion of all assignments and certain standards of behavior before a student may return to the regular campus. Usually the director of the center also has an exit interview with the student. During this interview, the transition of the student from the center to the home campus or other appropriate setting is discussed. Students are encouraged to seek the center's assistance if they encounter difficulties in adjusting to the home campus.

## PARENTAL NOTIFICATION, CONSENT, AND INVOLVEMENT

The center's director/principal should inform the parents by phone before or on the same day the student will be enrolled at the center. This oral notification should be followed by a letter (1) specifying the reasons for the student's placement at the center and (2) describing the rules of the center. Depending on the student's anticipated length of stay and other factors, the district may find it advisable to obtain parental permission before or at the time of placement. Currently, the 16 school-community guidance centers funded by the state do require parental notification and consent.

Each district should decide the extent to which parents are to be involved in other aspects of the center's operation. Some districts offer evening courses for parents designed to brief them on the developmental stages of adolescence, discipline, and effective communicaiton patterns. Several centers also have parent advisory councils. Parental involvement can potentially improve the student's attitude toward school and can generally enhance the effectiveness of the school-community guidance center placement.

## COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The community must understand the reasons for the program before a center is developed. Key community leaders including members of civic clubs, church groups, and the chamber of commerce should be informed about the purposes and general operation of the program.

Since cooperative working relationships will need to be established with juvenile courts, probation offices, health care organizations, and social service agencies, it is essential that these groups be involved in the early planning stages. It may be necessary for the district to draw up formal agreements with some agencies so a continuity of services to students can be developed.

## FOLLOW-UP SERVICES

Once a student returns to the regular campus, progress should be monitored for a specified period to determine the rate of adjustment and any potential difficulties. Teachers should complete progress reports on each student six weeks after his or her return to the regular campus. These reports are sent to the school-community guidance center where they are examined and become part of the center's evaluation process.

In some cases, the follow-up may be simply a phone call from the center to the regular campus to inquire about a student. Many students call the center's staff to let them know how they are doing—or for additional assistance.

## EVALUATION

The success of the center will, to a large extent, depend on an effective evaluation system based on short-term and long-term objectives. It is strongly recommended that standardized and non-standardized measures be used in the study. The conditions and schedule under which the measures are taken form the design of an evaluation study. The research design should use an external control group to determine whether the students at the center performed better than their counterparts at the regular campus. Without an adequate design, the results obtained could be attributed to factors other than the center's program.

Individual and group data collected for the evaluation should include the following:

- Average daily attendance, pre-center, during center, and post-center.
- Dropout rates, by campus and for the district as a whole.
- Recidivism rates.
- Pre/post academic achievement scores.
- Self-concept and other attitudinal indicators.
- Delinquency behavior indicators, including self-reports.
- Program costs.
- Disposition of cases.

Letters from various agencies verifying the extent to which the alternative center has had a positive effect on the community should be solicited and included in the evaluation report.

It is important that the findings of the evaluation be reported to teachers, the school board, parents, and other citizens. The merits of the center can be evaluated against its costs to provide the basis for a decision on whether to continue, modify, or discontinue the center.

## SUMMARY

The experiences of many school districts in this state indicate a school-community guidance center can be a viable strategy in responding to and managing the problems of student behavior. The centers can begin to identify and assist students with difficulties that contribute to truancy, suspension, academic failure, apathy, dropping out, and delinquency. The centers can help many students who otherwise may be lost to our society as productive citizens.

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**January 1984**
**GE4 243 01**